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STUDENT REPORT  
FLAVIUS VEGETIUS RENATUS  
GREAT ROMAN THINKER

Maj Johnny B. Drury 84-0715  
*"insights into tomorrow"*

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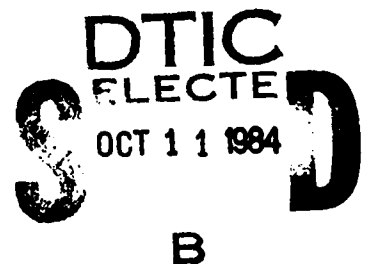
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AUTHOR(S) MAJOR JOHNNY B. DRURY, USAF

FACULTY ADVISOR MAJOR CHARLES M. PETTIJOHN, ACSC/EDOWB

SPONSOR MAJOR BERNARD D. CLAXTON, ACSC/EDCJ

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Major Johnny B. Drury received his commission in 1969 at Texas A&M University. After graduating from Undergraduate Pilot Training in 1970, he served in Southeast Asia as a forward air controller flying the OV-10A. Later flying assignments included tours in the T-37, CT-39, and C-141B aircraft. Major Drury served a staff tour at Headquarters, Military Airlift Command in 1980-81 as Deputy Special Assistant for Presentations, Command Briefing Team. Major Drury's formal education includes a Bachelor of Science Degree in Electrical Engineering from Texas A&M University and a Master of Arts Degree in Business Management from Webster University. He is also a graduate of Squadron Officer School and Air Command and Staff College. Major Drury has also attended Air Ground Operations School (AGOS) and Military Airlift Command's Air Operations School (AOS).

## Chapter One

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Flavius Vegetius Renatus, a military historian and Roman civil servant of apparently high rank, wrote De Re Militari in 390 AD in an attempt to stem the declining influence of the Roman military. (6:28; 7:68-69) The apathy of Rome's people, the decaying discipline and ability of its military forces, and a series of military disasters in the fourth century strongly influenced Vegetius to write his historical treatise. (4:137) This chapter examines those factors historians say contributed to Rome's military decline and led Vegetius to write De Re Militari. A discussion of a nation's military, however, must begin with a study of its citizenry.

Historians see inherent characteristics of the Roman civilian populace as the basis for the Empire's military problems. Roman citizens' familiarity with the comforts of a high civilization tended to weaken any strong feelings of patriotism for the Empire. (8:232) The great achievements of the civilization had become commonplace. The Roman people considered their high living standard to be a given right rather than a privilege to be maintained. The overwhelming successes of the military in the far reaches of the Empire substantially removed the idea of war from the minds of the civilian majority. Furthermore, the

growing wealth and long-time peace in the internal provinces contributed to the increasing "unwarlike character of the masses" and lack of support of the military. The average Roman saw no serious threat to his way of life. (8:232)

Military recruitment problems became one significant symptom of the declining civilian patriotism. The comforts of society disinclined men to military service. Recruitment from within the Empire became increasingly difficult despite the overwhelming ratio of population to troops. As a result of growing disinterest of civilized Romans for military service, the military forces became more dependent upon recruitment of troops from tribal groups in the frontier regions. The Roman officer and enlisted ranks increasingly came from barbarian backgrounds. (8:255) The Roman citizenry, therefore, came to depend on a military force having questionable allegiance to a centralized western government. (8:256)

In addition to declining civilian support for the military recruitment, general self-sacrifice and support for the Empire's defense became unpopular. Historians suggest the Roman state had essentially outgrown itself and the populace could not have been expected to feel any strong patriotism for such a large state. (8:232) Another explanation is the high level of energy and effort required by the society to maintain a high civilization had naturally run its course by the end of the fourth century. The intenseness of civilian self-sacrifice and support for defense was too great to be maintained indefinitely. (8:233)



Vegetius recognized the rapidly decaying support within the Roman civilian populace and attempted to revive that previous spirit of national sacrifice. He wrote of an example of ancient Roman civilian sacrifice that occurred during the Battle of Carthage in 149 BC. The Roman army had depended heavily on the catapult as a light, medium, and heavy artillery piece. The weapon was able to hurl arrows and stones or concrete projectiles weighing as much as 60 pounds up to a distance of 500 yards. The instrument's high-tension, elastic ropes required frequent replacement because of loss of elasticity. Women's hair proved best but was in short supply. (1:101) Vegetius lauded the patriotic sacrifices of the ancients of this era when he wrote:

Once in a siege of the Capital, when these weapons became unserviceable by long continued firing and when sinews were all used up, Roman matrons cut off their hair to send to their husbands in battle. The artillery was restored to service; the attack was repulsed. These most virtuous women preferred a life of freedom with their husbands, even with their beauty lost for a time, than with their beauty intact to become slaves to the enemy. (1:101)

Vegetius saw this particular example to be illustrative of a patriotic Roman spirit that was rapidly declining by his time. However, the decline in national spirit, patriotism, and discipline was not confined only to the civilian populace.

The military also demonstrated a weakening of structure that centuries before had made it the most powerful military force in the western world. (7:71; 8:233) Historians agree that one of many factors causing this military degeneration was the unionization of troops that began during the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus (193-211 AD). The Emperor permitted or encouraged

regimental clerks, artificers, ordnance personnel, musicians, and other special-duty men in each legion to form associations known as "colleges". History does not record how autonomous or voluntary these associations were in the legions. However, several historians agree the "soldier committees" no doubt had an adverse effect on overall discipline and morale and damaged military spirit and cohesiveness. (8:233) The effects of this eroded discipline could be seen in several battlefield disasters discussed later in this chapter.

In addition to the internal causes of Roman decline, a review of the Roman frontier military situations is important to the study of Vegetius' work. By the end of the fourth century, Rome's legions had expanded the empire's frontiers to their farthest limits. (6:28) This created not only an increasing dependency on barbarian forces to guard the many border defense positions, but also demonstrated Rome's evolving military strategy of immobile, heavily fortified forces. This compared interestingly to the very mobile, offensive-oriented Roman strategies of previous times.

Dependency on foreign troops to man the frontier positions created additional problems. Rome found the easiest way to obtain border forces was to accept, in groups, the personal following of barbaric chieftains who agreed to serve as officers. Naturally, these fragmented forces increased unit independence and the potential political importance of the commanders. The individual units felt more loyalty for their immediate commanders than for the Roman state. These divided loyalties led to a period of civil wars and internal confusion for the military. (8:233-234,255-256)

By late in the fourth century, Rome's large frontier borders were characterized by permanent lines of fortification. This represented a defensive strategy brought about by centuries of unbroken peace the interior Roman world had enjoyed. (8:235) These defensive positions sometimes only involved making strong alliances of friendship and cooperation with tribes just outside the borders. This type of border situation was common on the lower Rhine River. In contrast, the legions prepared defenses in less friendly Britain and the upper Rhine by devastating the countryside into a no-man's-land. This no-man's-land was a day's march wide in front of the frontier to prevent surprise attacks. On river borders the Romans used flotillas of guardboats. In the Africa and Syrian deserts, they built chains of permanent defensive positions arranged in depth and patrolled by horse or camel cavalry. (4:137)

Perhaps the most famous of Rome's frontier defenses, Hadrian's Wall and the German Limes, exemplified the military's desire to entrench in hardened, immobile positions. These two walls were built along the more hostile frontiers. (8:221) Hadrian's Wall, begun in 122 AD, was built for defense from attacks from the northern tribes of Britain. This earthen barrier stretched  $73\frac{1}{2}$  miles across the frontier. A ditch 27 feet wide and 9 feet deep guarded its outside rim. (12:83) Later, the legions strengthened the barrier with masonry 8 feet thick and 16 feet high. Comparatively, the Limes was a continuous earthen barrier stretching between 250 and 300 miles across Germany. (8:221) Because of a shortage of troops, these two walls were not manned permanently,

but provided protection for border patrols and substantial obstacles to the escape of barbarian raiding parties. Many raiders were caught and slaughtered under the walls by pursuing imperial troops. (6:147) These two hardened barriers were to become Rome's monuments to an era of dependence on an immobile defensive strategy and a restricted military mission. (8:221-231)

The Roman art of war apparently suffered measurably during the extended period of frontier defense. One historian concluded:

It seems as if the restriction of its (military) mission must have brought about some decline, as the service gradually forgot that it had ever been a field army, and more and more came to think of itself as a constabulary rooted to particular spots of ground. (8:231)

Although the Roman army remained superior to all opponents during the period, a certain decline of discipline and esprit de corps became evident in several important military conflicts prior to Vegetius' time. (8:231-233)

Three significant military events near the end of the fourth century illustrate symptoms of the Roman problems and additionally highlight an important revolution in western war strategies.

(13:57) These events were the Battle of Mursa (351 AD), the Battle of Strassburg (357 AD), and the Adrianople Campaign (378 AD).

(8:247) These three major civil wars had a large influence on Vegetius when he wrote De Re Militari soon after Adrianople. (4:137)

The first of these civil wars, the Battle of Mursa (in what is now Yugoslavia), pitted the Roman army of the East against the Roman army of the West. (8:247)

The Emperor of the East--Constantius--was superior in light and heavy cavalry and also in archers. He had stirred up the tribes beyond the Rhine to invade Gaul and so retain as much as possible of the Roman army in Gaul to defend that province. Nevertheless, the Western troops at Mursa seem to have been superior in legionary infantry and also included a large force of German and Frankish auxiliaries without body armour. Constantius' troops attacked in oblique order, left in front, and overlapping and rolling up the right of the Westerners. Meanwhile, the unarmoured Germans had suffered severely from the fire of the Eastern archers, so that when the invulnerable Eastern lancers finally succeeded in breaking into the formation of the Gallic legions, the Eastern light horse were easily able to complete the victory. (8,247)

This engagement cost the empire almost 60,000 soldiers. (6:153)

It not only illustrated the increasing feuds within the Roman military, but also hinted of the emerging power of cavalry. This beginning dominance of cavalry was to be punctuated later in the century.

The second significant Roman civil battle, the Strassburg Campaign, evolved from the events at Mursa six years before. The German barbarians, stirred up by Emperor Constantius, had pushed back the Roman frontier to below the Rhine River. Constantius appointed his cousin, Julian, to be "Caesar of the West" and sent him into Gaul to handle the situation. Constantius, however, secretly undermined Julian's operations. He ordered his commander in Switzerland not to support Julian's campaign. (8,247-248)

The results of Julian's campaign illustrated two increasingly common characteristics of Roman military operations of the era--competition for regional power among Roman commanders and lack of discipline among the troops. His operations were immediately complicated by an unexpected rebellion of the Roman army north

of the Seine. The lack of needed support cost him two entire legions during engagements with the Goths. Additionally, Julian expected his following march toward Strassburg to be aided by the Roman commander in Switzerland. That aid never came. As his weakened forces engaged the enemy again at Strassburg, his troops questioned his orders and battle plans. This created more confusion into an already difficult situation. Only with use of infantry backed by reserve units were Julian's forces able to thwart the barbarian attack. Julian's campaign at Strassburg had indeed been marred by the lack of mutual support between Roman commanders and an open lack of military discipline within the legions. (8:249)

The last of the three significant fourth-century conflicts was a result of allied barbarians being already within Roman frontier defenses. The Visigoths, a border tribe, were attracted by Roman "civilization" and had become strong allies and Christian converts. When attacked by Mongul Huns in 376, the Visigoths asked for and received protective refuge inside the border. During the next two years, Roman officials oppressed the tribe, profiteered on their food supplies, but most importantly, failed to disarm them. The resulting Visigoth revolt led to a battle that would change military strategy and tactics throughout the western world. (8:250-251; 11:208)

The Battle of Adrianople began in 378. (2:93) Emperor Valens, without waiting for needed reinforcements, anxiously marched his improperly rationed troops toward the enemy camps.

His undisciplined forces attacked the Goths without proper orders. In the resulting confusion, the barbarian cavalry out-maneuvered the Romans and destroyed over two-thirds of the Emperor's army. (8:252) This engagement marked the first victory of heavy cavalry over infantry. (2:93)

Adrianople was thus a turning point in military history. First, it marked the impending collapse of history's greatest empire at the hands of Germanic barbarians. (4:134) Secondly, and most importantly, the Battle of Adrianople proved the classical defensive strategies using infantry tactics were no longer a match for those of the more mobile, offensive cavalry. Heavy cavalry had suddenly become the ruling power in war. (13:55)

The apathy of Rome's people, the decaying discipline and ability of its military forces, and the later military disasters at Mursa, Strassburg, and Adrianople strongly influenced Vegetius to write his treatise. However, the decline of Rome's power had progressed too far to be arrested by his arguments. Even though his book failed to influence the fate of the Roman military, it did become the bible of western warfare for almost a millenium thereafter. (4:137) The following chapters review De Re Militari and its effects on the art of warfare throughout history.

## Chapter Two

### DE RE MILITARI

Vegetius recognized Rome had passed its zenith of military influence by the end of the fourth century when he wrote De Re Militari (390 AD) to call attention to the causes for the failing Empire and plead for a return to the practices of the "ancients" that had made Rome great. (4:137; 6:28) This chapter studies Vegetius' prescriptions for a revitalized Rome. First, however, a discussion of the sources of his military theory will set the stage for the study of De Re Militari.

Vegetius' military theories were not particularly original, nor were his historical accounts entirely accurate, but most historians agree De Re Militari was the most influential treatise on western warfare from Roman times to the 19th century. (7:67; 12:221) He readily admitted he collected much of his military doctrine from ancient manuscripts and regulations--sources lost or destroyed over time. (9:679) Vegetius rarely identified his sources, but apparently depended much on the military tactics expertise of Sextus Julius Frontinus, Governor of Britain in 74-78 AD. Historians also complain that Vegetius' historical accounts were chronologically imprecise and his indiscriminate references to "ancients" vaguely covered a wide range of history of over a thousand years. (12:221) Despite its literary irregularities, however, De Re



Militari was the most important reference on western warfare for over a thousand years and remains very influential to modern military tradition and theory.

De Re Militari consisted of five sections: selection and training of recruits; the legion and duties of officers; logistics, plans, and strategy; siege warfare; and naval tactics. This thesis will discuss only the first three sections as they are most representative of Vegetius' influence on later military theory. (7:69-72)

The first section, devoted to the selection and training of recruits, began by outlining the best sources of new trainees. According to Vegetius, young men from the country were preferable to urban recruits because they had "been brought up to the hardest labor" and were "strangers to the luxuries of life." (7:79) Additionally, he thought the recruits technical abilities extremely important to their selection.

In choosing recruits regard should be given to their trade. Fishermen, fowlers, confectioners, weavers, and in general all whose professions more properly belonging to women should, in my opinion, by no means be admitted into the service. On the contrary, smiths, carpenters, butchers, and huntsmen are the most proper to be taken into it. (7:79)

The training of every soldier, according to Vegetius, must be strenuous and disciplined. He believed every Roman soldier should be hardened so as to be able to march 24 miles at quick step in 5 hours in summer heat. He also advocated repetitive, disciplined drill in the use of all weapons and combat tactics. (7:81) Only through this repetitive drill could a soldier expect

to survive in battle, for errors made on the battlefield were irretrievable and fatal. Vegetius summed up the importance of adequate training for the legions when he wrote, "No state can either be happy or secure that is remiss and negligent in the discipline of its troops." (7:83-85)

The book's second section discussed the organization of the legions and officer corps and described some military practices and customs found in today's modern forces. For instance, the book provided for the soldiers' pay deposits; defined guard duty and the purpose of duty officers; explained the need for a oath of enlistment; and outlined promotion procedures. Additionally, the book covered the importance of maintaining their equipment and personal appearance in proper order: "Can that man be reckoned a good soldier who through negligence suffers his arms to be spoiled by dirt and rust?" (7:111)

The third section of De Re Militari, perhaps the most important, dealt with military tactics, strategy, and war planning. His discussions of reserve forces, military intelligence, and the relationship between infantry and cavalry made this section particularly influential in later military operations of the Middle Ages. (7:21)

Vegetius emphasized the importance of reserves to every successful military operation. Roman reserve forces were composed of choice infantry and cavalry and always held initially at the rear of the primary forces during conflicts. During combat, the reserves could then be quickly dispatched to any part of the lines

shown to be weakening. Additionally, if the friendly forces were at the advantage during an engagement, the reserves formed the necessary wedge or pincer movements against the enemy without drawing down the strength of the primary forces. "The method of having bodies of reserves in the rear of the army...is of great consequence towards the gaining of a battle." (7:156)

Proper logistical planning was also a necessity for battlefield successes. Vegetius argued that without proper planning, famine could be more deadly than the enemy. Exact calculations of provisions were necessary for the type and size of war operations expected in the field. These provisions must be gathered in sufficient quantity and strategically stored in the most convenient places prior to opening a campaign. "The main and principal point in war," Vegetius noted, "is to secure plenty of provisions and to destroy the enemy by famine." (7:128-129)

Military intelligence and counterintelligence, according to Vegetius, were as important as battlefield engagement itself. Commanders were to always be familiar with surrounding terrain for safety of marches and possible places for enemy attacks. In unfamiliar territory, indigenous personnel were used as informants and guides. Vegetius also outlined the proper use of armed reconnaissance patrols and spies. For example, he advised, "The night is safer and more advantageous for your spies to do their business in than day, for if they are taken prisoners, you have betrayed yourself." (7:133-134)

Perhaps the most influential and historically significant

instructions Vegetius offered in his book were the relationships in battle between infantry and cavalry. He noted that the cavalry arm usually delivered the decisive attack during battle, but strongly contended the heavy infantry remained the cornerstone of military victories. (7:43; 8:252) Instead of drawing on lessons learned at Adrianople, Vegetius relied on outdated tactics of previous eras (4:137) when he stated, "The state of the cavalry...must be inquired into, but more especially that of the infantry, for the main strength of an army consists of the latter." (7:143) He saw the cavalry, the offensive shock forces of the military, as only supplementary to the time-proven infantry. The next chapter shows that although Vegetius' theories were unknowingly outdated when written, they were, nevertheless, to become important to warfare many years later.

## Chapter Three

### EFFECTS ON HISTORY

Vegetius' book, although not influential to the Roman cause as he intended, became most important to later military operations and shed light on modern military strategy. This chapter first explores how De Re Militari strongly influenced military science for many centuries after it was written and remains a factor in modern military traditions and theory. Secondly, a study of Vegetius' theories shows one of history's first examples of military strategies changing with developments in weapon technology and tactics. These strategy changes have remained consistently cyclical even into modern times.

History records De Re Militari remained the cornerstone of western warfare theory for over a thousand years. (7:67) Fulk the Black, "the able and ferocious" Count of Anjou (circa 1000 AD), considered Vegetius his favorite author. Two hundred years later, Vegetius' book still influenced western military campaigns. For example, Fulk's great-great-great-grandson, Henry II of England, considered De Re Militari a professional necessity. Henry's son, Richard Coeur de Lion, likewise always kept a copy at his side. The popularity of the book continued to expand when translated into French about 1300 AD, under the title "The Art of Knighthood", and later into Bulgarian. In 1473, an edition of De Re Militari

was among the first books ever printed. (7:68; 8:294-295) Count Montecuculli, the conqueror of the Turks at St Gotthard, wrote in his memoirs in 1670, "...there are spirits bold enough to believe themselves great captains as soon as they know how to handle a horse, carry a lance at charge in a tournament, or as soon as they have read the precepts of Vegetius." Austrian Field Marshal Prince de Ligne, continued the praise of Vegetius' influence when he wrote as late as 1770, "A God, said Vegetius, inspired the legion, but for myself, I find that a God inspired Vegetius." (7:67; 8:488) Such was the reputation of Vegetius and De Re Militari until almost the 19th century, and the influence continues into our modern military.

The roots of modern military tradition and theory can, in part, be traced to Vegetius. As mentioned in Chapter II, Vegetius was the first in the western world to describe such common military traditions as enlistment oaths, promotion procedures, ceremonial music, and "spit and polish" standards. (7:111) These traditions, although somewhat altered over time, remain with us today. Additionally, the modern "Principles of War" found in AFM 1-1 (3:3-7) strongly reflect theory found in Vegetius' work. Support for each of the principles can be found in De Re Militari; these are but a few:

Principle of "Offensive":

The most material article is to determine whether it is most proper to temporize or to bring the affair to a speedy decision by action. (7:144)

#### Principle of "Surprise":

An able general never loses a favorable opportunity of surprising the enemy...In all cases the adversary (must be) surprised and destroyed before they have time to put themselves on guard. (7:158)

#### Principle of "Logistics":

The incumbrance of baggage is often an occasion of its (army) being surprised in its passage...An exact calculation must therefore be made before commencement of war as to the number of troops and expenses incident thereto... (7:125-128)

Vegetius did more, however, than give us a basis for modern military tradition and theory. He unknowingly described a nation's dependence on a defensive military strategy that, although outdated in his time, was to be alternately applicable throughout history. Chapter I discussed Rome's dependence on a defensive strategy as shown in its doctrine of border defense. As a result of having expansive frontiers and insufficient manpower, Rome came to rely on fortifications such as Hadrian's Wall and the German Limes and an infantry to man them. This defensive strategy proved adequate until confronted by the more mobile, offensive-oriented Gothic cavalry. Historians partially attribute this dominance of cavalry over infantry to developments in technology and tactics. Invention of the stirrup was one such technological advancement. (8:270) Vegetius failed to recognize the new-found importance of cavalry to military operations. Nevertheless, offensive military strategy began to replace the previous defensive strategy during his time and remained dominant until the Middle Ages.

Cavalry remained the dominant arm of military forces until

the end of the Middle Ages when, because of evolved military technology, the infantry regained its previous importance. The once mobile, highly effective horseman became encumbered with heavy armor and weaponry and increasingly vulnerable to innovations such as the crossbow, the Swiss pike, and gunpowder weapons. These advances in weaponry greatly reduced the shock effect of cavalry and placed emphasis on infantry and immobile fortifications. (4,401,407) Again, western military strategy experienced another change--a change toward defense. These strategy changes were to be cyclical and increasingly frequent throughout history.

The strategy cycles have continued into modern times. In this century, the defensive-oriented French Maginot Line succumbed to the German offensives which used the new weapon developments and tactics of battle tanks and aircraft. (10:16) Later, the aggressive Soviet strategy in post-World War II Europe was neutralized by the defense of United States nuclear missiles in Western Europe. Military experts see this cyclic trend continuing into the relatively near future. For example, Lt Gen (Ret) Daniel O. Graham sees the "High Frontier" technology as a new military defensive strategy to counter Soviet offensive nuclear superiority. He stated:

We urgently recommend the adoption of a new...strategy of Assured Survival to replace Mutual Assured Destruction. Assured Survival can be achieved by using United States technological advantages, especially in space, to provide our citizens with long neglected protection... (5:17)

We see Vegetius' De Re Militari contributed more than just a history of the Roman military. His theories were strongly



influential to warfare throughout the Middle Ages and remain a significant part of our modern military system. Additionally, he highlighted a significant change in military strategy that was to represent one of the first of many cyclic changes over history caused by improved technology and tactics.

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